



New York State Catholic Conference

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Testimony of the New York State Council of Catholic School Superintendents

presented by

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regarding the
2022 - 2023
Elementary and Secondary Education Budget

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Introduction

While enduring the enormous challenges brought on by the COVID pandemic, Catholic schools have once again proven their dedication to and singular focus on the well-being of the children they serve. By faithfully implementing COVID safety protocols, our schools have been able to provide children and their families precisely what they have needed most: Safe, continuous, in-person instruction, while many other schools have not.

Our continued success, however, has not been without significant costs and setbacks. More than 30 Catholic schools closed due to the loss and reduction of income of our tuition-paying families. To maintain in-person instruction – under the strict health requirements of the state – schools were forced to shoulder many unanticipated costs: Hiring additional nurses and other staff, complying with masking and testing requirements, installing physical barriers and signage, purchasing personal protective equipment, acquiring cleaning supplies, arranging for ongoing sanitizing throughout and between each day, installing or modifying air purification equipment, purchasing and training for additional technology, collecting and reporting data to the Department of Health on a daily basis – the list goes on and on. Taken together thus far, these costs range between \$1,000 to \$5,000 per pupil. Although our schools have been eligible for some of the federal emergency COVID-relief programs, the relief is falling dramatically short of what is needed – and certainly far below the per/pupil level of support which has been made available to public schools.

Fortunately, Governor Hochul's Executive Budget proposal reflects a much more positive financial outlook than what we would have anticipated a year ago. This economic upswing therefore enables lawmakers to support the state's Catholic and other religious and independent schools in a way that will help our schools fill the financial and programmatic gaps exacerbated by the pandemic. Accordingly, this testimony highlights key program areas in which increased state support is critically important.

Health, Safety, & Security: We are grateful to Governor Hochul for proposing a significant increase in funding, from \$15 million to \$45 million, for the *Non-Public Safety Equipment (NPSE)* program as well as an expansion of the allowable expenses to include remediation of hazardous conditions and the maintenance and repair of facilities, all in an effort to protect the health and safety of the students, staff and community members who use our school buildings. We are especially grateful to the legislature for having initiated this program immediately following the horrific shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. The on-going threats to religious communities as well as the COVID pandemic highlight the growing and increasingly complex array of facility, health, safety and security needs of our schools. Coupled with aging buildings, our aggregate unmet obligations are well in the billions of dollars. Governor Hochul's recommended increase in support of *NPSE* will enable schools to more easily address their unmet needs and we urge the legislature to further add to its support of the program.

STEM: Governor Hochul recommends an increase in funding to support Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math education in our schools, from \$40 million to \$55 million. While this initiative has bolstered our schools' ability to offer rigorous STEM programs to better prepare students for competitive careers, it is clear that the demand for and rapid changes in STEM instruction is outpacing the state's support of the program. In fact, applications for such funding total some \$100 million, far above the current appropriation. We urge increased support for the program toward \$100 million to meet current demand.

Mandated Services Aid (MSA) / Immunization: While the Executive Budget maintains level funding for MSA, no funding is provided for the \$7 million in **immunization** compliance costs incurred by schools located in the cities of Buffalo, Rochester and New York. Given the elimination of the religious exemption for compulsory vaccinations as well as the increased collecting and monitoring of immunization data, sufficient funds must be provided to fully enable schools to carry out their responsibilities under the state's immunization program. We urge restoration of the original \$7 million appropriation enacted several years ago.

Energy Efficiency Projects: Advances in energy technologies not only reduce energy usage, thereby helping all utility rate-payers, they also improve the spaces in which we live, work, and learn. While these projects are expensive to initiate, the savings realized in some projects can easily pay for the initial expense in a relatively short period of time. The overwhelming majority of our schools however, unlike their public-school counterparts, lack the means to initiate such projects. We urge adoption of a combined energy efficiency grant and loan program of \$75 million to provide seed money to initiate energy efficiency projects. Those school communities utilizing the loan portion of the fund would repay their initial grants with the savings they achieve in energy efficiency, thereby allowing the fund to continue to benefit others.

Transportation Services / Funding: Next to their ability to afford tuition, the second most common challenge faced by parents in enrolling their children in religious or independent schools is their ability to have their children transported to school. When parents are denied their choice of a religious or an independent school because transportation services are not available, are unreasonable or even unreliable, the burden on taxpayers increases as more of these children are forced to enroll in public schools. Moreover, disparate school district calendars result in fragmented transportation services. We urge the following: (1) provide \$25 million to reimburse our schools for their share of the costs of transporting students where there are gaps in or an absence of public school district-provided transportation; (2) restore 90 percent state reimbursement of school district costs of transporting religious and independent school students; (3) require transportation to be provided when there are unavoidable disparities in school schedules and calendars, including when public schools are closed or when they make mid-year calendar changes; (4) require small city school districts to transport children up to the maximum mileage limit rather than city limits; and (5) increase the maximum distance school districts are required to transport children to school from 15 to 25 miles.

State Office of Religious and Independent Schools (SORIS): Governor Hochul's Executive Budget adopts the Regents' request for a \$657,000 increase, from \$800,000 to \$1,457,000, to support the work of SORIS including work related to enforcement of the "substantial equivalency" provisions of the education law and SED regulations. The creation of this relatively new office within SED has enabled the department to reverse the work backlog and the delay in disbursing program funds benefitting students and teachers in our schools. While we continue to urge restoration of the original \$2 million for SORIS, we support the Regents' and Governor's recommendation.

Teacher Workforce: The Governor's initiatives to help schools fill the gaps in the teaching workforce are needed and welcomed. It is critically important however, that the state's religious and independent schools can participate in and benefit from these programs on an equitable basis. In addition to our equitable participation in these initiatives, we urge a separate \$10 million appropriation to support the on-going teacher and leader professional development needs of religious and independent schools, including the state-mandated continuing education requirements for certified teachers and leaders.

Nursing Services: An increasing number of children have acute and chronic health problems that require the daily attention and care of professional school nurses. Yet the shortage of school nurses leaves school employees in the untenable position of having to respond to health emergencies and manage chronic health problems. School administrators and teachers are not health professionals and simply should not be forced to manage and respond to their students' asthma, diabetes, food allergies and other health conditions. For parents, as well as for the school staff to whom children have been entrusted, there is nothing more important than the health and safety of their children. It is simply unconscionable to put the lives and well-being of children at risk. We urge you to include sufficient funding to ensure that a full-time nurse is available for every public, independent and religious school.

Academic Intervention Services (AIS): Only \$922,000 is available for AIS, far below the \$20 million needed. Without adequate funding now, these at-risk children may easily fall further behind, requiring more expensive academic interventions later. AIS funding should be increased so that, like public schools, our schools are able to provide these services to our children who are most in need.

Helping Tuition-Paying Families: This is, by far, the area of greatest need for the families who sacrifice to send their children to religious and independent schools. These families are shouldering the dual burden of paying taxes to support public schools while simultaneously paying tuition to support the own children's education – paying twice for education, as it were.

Lawmakers have recognized the enormous burden on property taxpayers and have enacted programs to control property taxes, including the STAR program and the property tax cap. Moreover, Governor Hochul's proposals to reduce property taxes, as well as several proposals by state legislators, are clear indications that more tax relief is needed. While these property tax relief programs and proposals offer some indirect relief of the tuition burden our families carry, none of them provide the kind of direct assistance tuition-paying families need and receive routinely in most other states and territories.

Lawmakers in 33 states, Puerto Rico, as well as Congress, in the case of the District of Columbia, have enacted multiple forms of tuition assistance enabling families most in need to choose the educational setting best suited for their children. These programs have helped multiple generations achieve the kind of educational equality and economic opportunity on which New York State prides itself. And although demand for our schools remains strong, even working- and middle-class families too often cannot afford the modest tuition that we must charge – and there are long waiting lists for the limited number of scholarships that we offer. Yet, New York continues to be one of the states denying its own residents the much-needed relief provided by these programs. As lawmakers in two thirds of the country have done, we urge you to enact a meaningful tuition assistance program to enable children of the neediest families, including low- and working-class families, to attend a school best suited for them.

In Summary: While we are very grateful to Governor Hochul and the legislature for the multiple programs and funding streams provided to the benefit of students in religious and independent schools, the fact remains that our schools operate on a dramatically uneven playing field. Even though 13 percent of children in New York State attend a religious or independent school, less than 1 percent of state education spending is devoted to these children. The bulk of the cost of educating these children is shouldered by their families already overburdened with taxes to support the public education system. Continued and expanded state support of the students in religious and independent schools will benefit virtually every community across the state and will help make New York the truly progressive state it continues to aspire to be.